

# SPECIAL CANADA GOOSE PERMITS

At one time in the early 1900s, giant Canada geese were considered extinct. The largest of 11 Canada goose subspecies recognized in North America, the giants were the only subspecies known to nest within the Great Plains, including North Dakota, and their absence left a considerable void for decades.

When remnant flocks of these 10-13-pound birds were identified in the 1930s, restoration efforts began. The success of this restoration effort around the country and in North Dakota is well known.

It wasn't until 1965 that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated North Dakota had about 100 wild breeding pairs of giant Canadas. In 1973 the FWS estimate was 3,800 breeding pairs. In that same year, hunters harvested more than 37,000 Canada geese, but only about 6 percent or just over 2,000 of those were the large variety, either locally raised or migrants. The rest were migrant lesser Canadas.

In the early 1980s North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists began an aggressive program for trapping and transplanting giant Canada geese.

In early summer, biologists would trap goslings and some adults in areas that had sufficient numbers of these birds, and transport them to new areas. The program was based on research that indicated flightless female goslings would return to nest and raise a family in the same area where they learned to fly.

The theory worked. Game and Fish moved several thousand birds over the course of a decade and established breeding populations in every county in the state. When birds were moved to new areas, protective zones were established where hunters could not take any Canada geese. Seasons were kept short and daily limits were restricted so the population could build.

While all this was occurring, the overall Canada goose harvest remained relatively stable through the early 1990s, but the number of large birds in the harvest gradually increased, from 2,100 in 1972 to 16,000 in 1992.

Until that point, biologists were largely responsible for steady growth in the giant Canada goose population in North Dakota. Then Mother Nature stepped in with abundant rain and snow that put water back into thousands of wetlands that had been dry for many years. With hundreds of thousands of acres of new breeding habitat to occupy, the giant Canada goose population took off on its own.

Though Game and Fish stopped its transplant efforts, by 2001 biologists estimated the number of breeding giant Canada geese in the state at 180,000. During this time of rapid goose population growth, Department administrators removed all the zones that were closed to Canada goose hunting, took advantage of all the season days allowed under Fish and Wildlife Service frameworks, and took the maximum daily limit allowed as well.

The total Canada goose harvest topped 100,000 in 1996 and the large Canada goose harvest broke 100,000 in 2000.

While this escalation in Canada goose numbers was a welcome phenomenon for state waterfowl hunters, as the population went up, so too did the frequency of complaints coming in from landowners who were noting problems with geese feeding in developing crop fields.

While Canada geese eat mostly waste grains in the fall, they are grazers by nature and during spring and summer much of their diet is vegetation. Not long after their eggs hatch, goose and gander start leading their brood on daily outings away from water to lunch on anything green and growing.

When that closest food source is a crop field with newly emerged soybeans or corn or small grain, the birds can wear out their welcome.

At first, when landowner concerns started surfacing, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services agency, with funding provided by the Game and Fish Department, started working with producers to minimize losses. Techniques included scaring and hazing devices such as propane cannons, flagging and cracker shells, as well as fencing and natural barriers.

In addition, in 1999 Game and Fish allowed for the first time an early goose season designed to specifically target giant Canada geese. That first year the season was opened in early September in Sargent and Richland counties only. Since then, Game and Fish has held a statewide early Canada goose season each year.

In those five early seasons, hunters have taken more than 150,000 geese. Most of them are resident giant Canadas, though in some years 10-15 percent of the total bag consisted of early migrant lesser Canada geese.

Despite all these factors that led to considerable additional harvest, the giant Canada goose population in North Dakota is still holding at a high level and concerns over agricultural crop damage have continued to increase. In response to that, starting in 2002, the Game and Fish Department decided to issue special Canada goose permits as allowed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and USDA Wildlife Services.

These permits would allow producers the option of direct control of resident Canada geese that were causing problems. The control activities could include egg and nest destruction, trapping and relocating, and killing of adult geese and goslings (with shotguns only, use of rifles is not allowed) that were eating crops. These same approaches had been authorized in other states for several years.

The intent of the program is to focus on Canada goose depredation at specific sites, in conjunction with other hazing and scaring tactics, and additional effort by the landowner in allowing hunting during open seasons. It

was not intended to deter geese from golf courses, city parks or housing developments.

The special permits first became available in June 2002 to landowners who had previously documented problems with goose depredation. Nine landowners received permits and only one reported killing geese – six adults and 12 goslings.

In 2003 applications were available earlier and 66 producers received special permits. These producers reported more than 10,000 geese on their properties and about 790 acres of cropland affected. Losses claimed amounted to about \$2,300 per producer.

While the Game and Fish Department was authorized to allow killing of up to 6,000 geese in 2003, and destruction of up to 1,000 nests, producers reported taking only 285 adult birds and 171 goslings, plus 70 nests destroyed. Landowners removed geese in 19 of North Dakota's 53 counties. Sargent County had 25 landowners who reported removing geese, Stutsman County had seven and Richland County had six. No other county had more than four producers who removed geese.

Several producers who used shotguns, along with other scare devices, reported adequate success in keeping geese out of crops. Some producers who received permits did not kill any geese, but used other methods to keep birds out of their crops.

The decision to allow direct control of giant Canada geese did not come easily to Game and Fish Department managers, and each year about this time when permit applications go out to producers who have had goose depredation problems in the past, there remains some uneasiness about allowing the killing of adult geese with goslings outside of what are already very liberal hunting seasons.

Here's a look at some of the factors involved in the decision on whether to issue special control permits, **From Both Sides.**

## One Side

- Special permits give producers a last resort option to dispatch geese that are directly causing damage.
- Special permits are authorized only for landowners who have previously documented problems and for whom other methods of keeping geese out of crops have not worked effectively.



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- Special hunting seasons allow greater overall harvest, but by early September when that season starts, the crop damage is already been done, and there's no guarantee that the birds harvested were the ones causing the problems.

- Other states have allowed special permits for direct goose control for years.

## The Other Side

- By encouraging hunting, and use of alternative hazing methods, most landowners can reduce goose depredation in the long run without killing adults and goslings in spring and early summer.

- Killing geese in spring, especially young ones, elicits a negative public response for both landowner and managing agency.

- Landowners who plant their crops right up to edges of wetlands should expect some use by geese. There are ways to create barriers so geese have difficulty reaching the field.

*What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at [ndgf@state.nd.us](mailto:ndgf@state.nd.us); call us at 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*